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Review of the book A patchwork shawl: Chronicles of South Asian women in America

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that the book has only one flaw and that is some current issues of American Indians were not dealt with in any kind of detail. For instance, the gaming issue is very volatile and rapidly affecting the status of tribes and their members. Only superficial attention was given to such a 'hot' topic that bears such importance for self-determination of Indian Peoples. This lack of fully addressing current issues limits the usefulness of the book's bibliography. However this observation should not detract from the importance of this classic work on Native Americans and their legal issues, and steps toward a more fully realised national identity.

DOUGLAS HEFFINGTON, *Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee*

A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America

S.D. DASGUPTA (Ed.), 1998

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

pp. x + 239, ISBN 0-8135-2518-7

Ever since western feminist scholarship was accused of defining gender in transhistorical and transcultural ways, there have been attempts to add the category, 'woman of colour', in feminist enterprises that range from the academic to the administrative. Such token gestures inevitably re-inscribe the problem by glossing over distinctive material histories and the particularity of women's experiences and struggles. For those of us who refuse such additive, tokenist approaches, *A Patchwork Shawl* edited by Shamita Das Dasgupta is a welcome contribution. Written by South Asian immigrant and first generation women, *A Patchwork Shawl* is, to use Dasgupta's words, 'a collection of stories: the stories of women's lives' (p. 1) and each narrative provides a specific and vivid perspective on the South Asian gendered, immigrant experience.

Dismantling stereotypes is perhaps the most important contribution of this book. Each essay overturns the clichéd and caricatured representations of South Asian women as passive, traditional and subservient. Instead we get defiant portraits of women as active agents who explore the complex and often contradictory network of oppressions that position them and seek out productive ways towards resistance and autonomy. Questions of identity form the common theme that binds the collection together. Each writer addresses how notions of home, community and nation are enmeshed in the representation and construction of self.

Divided into three sections, each division reflects different layers of identity construction. Beginning with personal and relational issues, the chapters fan out to end with analyses of gender and the global transnational economy. However, at every point cultural and historical specificity is maintained, so that we get analyses that are contextual and local. In the introduction, Dasgupta goes beyond simply summarising the various chapters. Rather, she sketches in broad strokes the key issues that surround the South Asian immigrant communities in general and the women in particular. Examining the idea of home in both its rhetorical and material manifestations, she explains how women in South Asian immigrant communities become repositories of cultural heritage and symbols of nationalism. Referring to her own well known work with Manavi, the pioneering South Asian organisation that focuses on domestic violence, she briefly comments on the role of the family, both literally and figuratively, in silencing issues around sexuality and violence against women. Most importantly, Dasgupta concludes her introduction by pointing out that 'resistance and activism have

been central to South Asian women's history' (p. 11). Contextualising South Asian women's activism within cultural and historical contexts, she attempts to avoid the typical and problematic dichotomy of progressive versus traditional, where the former is associated with 'West' and assumed to be the sole impetus for all emancipatory ideas and impulses.

The first section of the book is launched by a provocative essay by Grace Poore who challenges the usefulness of identity terms such as 'woman of colour', 'Asian American', and 'South Asian'. Employing several examples to make her point she demonstrates how current labels that denote ethnicity do not reflect how racism affects 'different people differently' (p. 27). Instead she argues it feeds into reductive politics and inhibits 'shared resistance' (p. 31). The essays by Naheed Hasnat and Lubna Chowdhary highlight the multiple tensions involved as Pakistani women in America struggle to negotiate their sense of self at the crossroads of religion, culture, and multiple national locations. Hasnat uses her own positioning as a 'Muslim-American Pakistani woman' to continue the project of interrogating identity classifications while Chowdhary demonstrates how four immigrant Pakistani Muslim women have forged hybrid identities and empowered themselves in inventive ways. Concluding this section is Surina Khan's personal narrative of what it means to be South Asian and lesbian and Naheed Islam's interviews with Indian lesbians in the United States that reveal how the politics of home, community, and nation police the expression of sexual identity. Both these essays are particularly significant, as discussions around sexual identity in relation to South Asian communities, both academic and otherwise, are rare.

The chapters in the second section begin by considering the delicate relationship between immigrant mothers and their first generation daughters and end by chronicling the disturbing and often silenced issue of domestic violence and marital rape. Writing as a psychotherapist, Manisha Roy uses sample case studies to understand the (mis)communication between immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. Struggling to maintain and perpetuate the image of the 'good Indian woman', the South Asian mother and daughter are caught in conflicts that invoke heritage, homeland and preservation of imagined national identities. In contrast to Roy's rather prescriptive approach, Sayantani DasGupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta present a dialogical essay as a mother and daughter. As they tack back and forth between analytical commentary and personal reflections we understand how fears of 'cultural betrayal and dilution', the community's resistance to assimilation, and the experiences of racism are implicated in South Asian-American mother-daughter relationships. Concluding this section are two accounts of domestic violence. Rinita Mazumdar discusses how cultural and religious texts sanction marital rape both in India and its diaspora. Satya Krishnan and her colleagues provide a frightening and contemporary picture of domestic violence as it manifests in the South Asian community in America.

The final section contains articles by Sunita Sunder Mukhi and Sonia Shah who both address gender politics in relation to public and collective displays of nationalism and the global post- and neo-colonial economy. Also included in this section is Anannya Bhattacharjee's previously published 'The Habit of Ex-Nomination.' Although Bhattacharjee's article is an insightful and significant piece, I was dissatisfied with its inclusion. Given the valuable space of such an anthology and the small but definitely growing body of scholarship in this area, a new article on national identity and gender would have better sufficed than such a well-known and much cited article.

Eminently readable, *A Patchwork Shawl* with its contemplation of gender in relation to personal memories and experience, collective imaginings of community and

narratives of nationhood, is relevant to both the general reader and the scholar interested in issues of gender, national identity and diaspora studies. Readers looking for an in-depth engagement and advancement of social and cultural theory might be disappointed. However, as a very specific chronicle of the diversity of experience among South Asian women in America this book is a bold and notable achievement.

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Spirit of Europe: A Subliminal History

BRUCE ALLSOPP, 1997

Lewes, Sussex: Book Guild Ltd

pp. 225, £16.50 (hb), ISBN 185 776 1685

The *Spirit of Europe* is an affable and discursive book by an experienced author in the spheres of architectural and art history. It claims, in its sub-title, to be a 'subliminal history.' Subliminal, we are told, comes from the Latin for below the threshold. Subliminal history thus attempts to pierce through the written documents of 'proper history' to the mass of human experience which, though often unrecorded, nonetheless contains 'a great deal of truth.' The historian must infer, speculate, and honestly interpret this hidden story which forms a 'valuable complement to established history.' The book is therefore 'not "proper" history; it is an excursion into the uncharted past of the people of Europe' (p. 20).

Traditional histories of Europe, contends the author, have been preoccupied with destructive conflict, and have neglected the creative aspects of man's history—the ongoing building of Western civilisation by, in particular, the middle and artisan classes. The church and religion have played an important part here, as have the myths, legends, and dreams of the people. This, rather than the rise and fall of dynasties and the succession of battles, is the true subject of history.

The theme of the book, if not new, promises to be of interest, especially if sustained over the sweep of European history. Unfortunately its title is a misnomer. The subliminal theme is not rigorously pursued and it cannot be said that the 'spirit of Europe' emerges from its pages. What we have is one man's interpretation, from a spiritual and humanistic perspective, of certain leading developments in European history. If one consistent theme does emerge, it is the futile and destructive nature of war.

The *Spirit of Europe* is thus not a conventional scholarly work. There are, for instance, hardly any meaningful footnotes or references. It is, rather, a sort of magpie's treasure hoard, in which numerous historical observations are presented, each frequently bearing no obvious connection to the other. The treatment is undisciplined, occasionally eccentric, and would have benefited from tighter editing. There is, for instance, much repetition. Thus the word 'subliminal' is defined identically three times in the first 21 pages. It is stated on page 175 that 'The *Landscape Annual* ... gave economic sustenance to the English landscape painters who travelled far and wide in seeking picturesque views.' On page 206 we are reminded: 'Artists travelled far and wide to paint views for publishers, who had them copied by engravers to illustrate books and periodicals, such as the *Landscape Annual* ... this provided the economic basis upon which watercolourists could subsist.' Such repetition suggests hasty composition, and